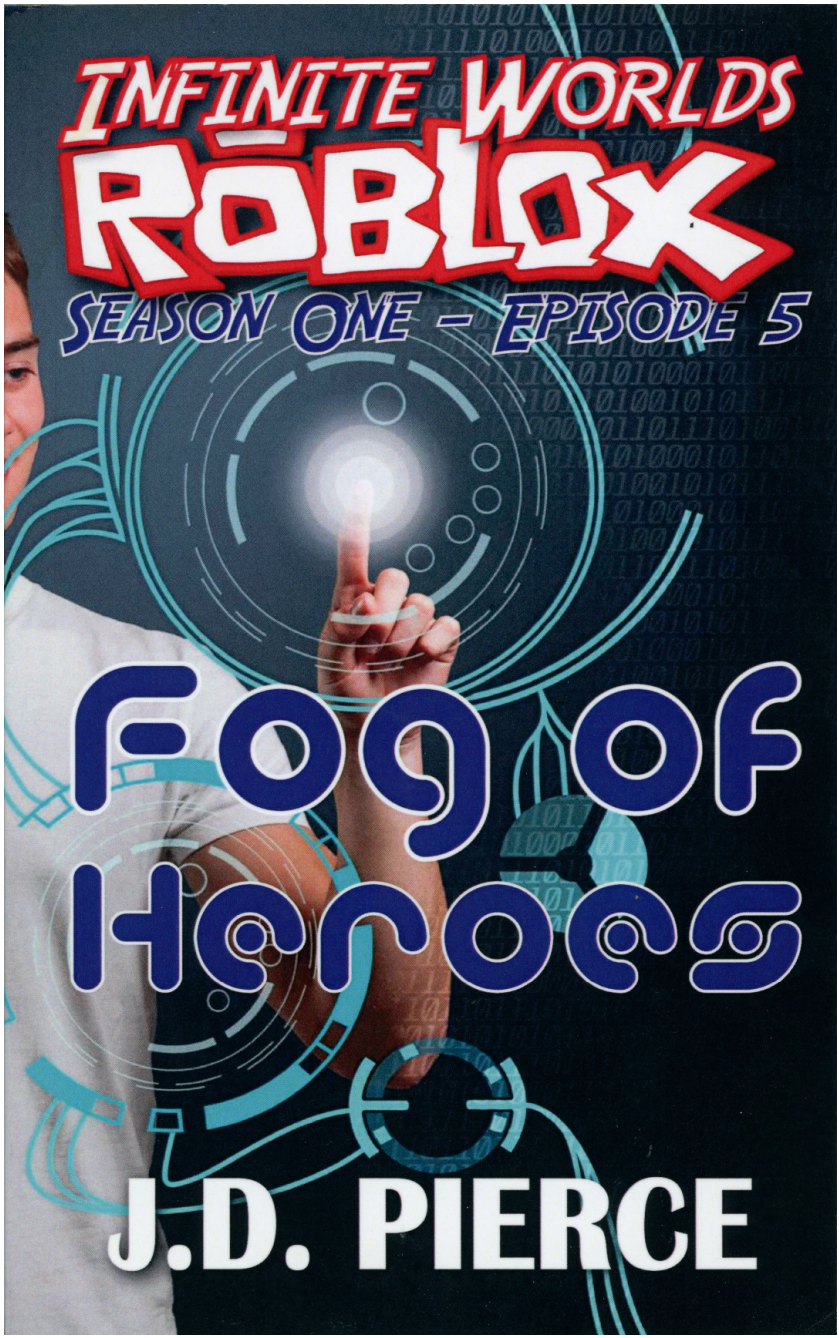
INFINITE WORLDS
ROBLOX
SEASON ONE - EPISODE 5
FOG OF HEROES
J.D. PIERCE

Fog of Heroes

Infinite Worlds ROBLOX
Season One - Episode 5

by J.D. Pierce

Summary

The battle to save Earth begins online.

Season One - Episode 5

With Max and Terri captured, the plan to retrieve Thomas has fallen apart. Chester has a final-option strategy to help the aliens, but there are people in the real world who will stop at nothing to prevent it.

INFINITE WORLDS ROBLOX unfolds over six books of approximately 150 pages each (20,000 words) with the first five books ending in epic cliffhangers.

This book is a work of fiction. References to real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales are intended only to provide a sense of authenticity, and are used fictitiously. All other characters, and all incidents and dialogue, are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real.

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Please support the author of the Infinite Worlds Roblox series, Steve DeWinter: https://bit.ly/SteveDeWinter-AZ

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Chapter 1

Noah stared at the screen of his computer.

His connection with ROBLOX had somehow been severed at the source when Desmond destroyed the communicator.

That shouldn't have done anything on his end. He should have been able to log back into Max's world. He should have been able to restore his connection and find Terri again. Instead, his computer rebooted itself and now he couldn't even get online.

He launched his data packet sniffer program that he always kept running in the background and read the final entry from the data stream that went from his computer to the ROBLOX servers.

As he read the results, his heart started pounding heavily in his chest.

That wasn't right.

He read it again.

That wasn't possible.

He checked the registry on his computer only to find that it was rewritten. He studied the logs again and found that a program on the internet had gained access to his systems despite his military spec firewall and encrypted router courtesy of the United States government contacts his dad had with several high ranking politicians.

While they may not have been the latest in military tech, they were only one step behind and should have been more than enough to stop any run-of-the-mill intruder.

The implication was clear. Whoever had broken through his firewall, and rewritten his registry, was not your ordinary everyday cybercriminal.

This was someone with skills.

He shivered despite the room's comfortable temperature as he decided his next action.

Noah didn't care how good this hacker's skills were. No matter who he was, he left a trace of his presence when his program passed through Noah's running sniffer. Noah would figure out where this unwanted program originated and shut it down.

Nobody would get the better of Noah.

Nobody.

He hunched over his keyboard and was ready to dive in and prepare for an all-out cyberwar when there was a faint knock at his door. It opened immediately and his mother poked her head into his room. "I thought I heard you on your computer. You should be in bed. You have a long day tomorrow."

He returned his full attention to his computer screen and began typing. "I know. I'll go to bed soon."

She opened the door wider and stepped in.

"We both know that's not true. You get sucked into that infernal machine, and before you know it, the sun's coming up."

He found the location of where the program had originated and his heart stopped.

Forcing his voice to stay calm but never taking his eyes away from the screen he replied "That won't happen, I promise". His jaw tightened and he clenched his teeth as he checked the address against a list of secure government installations he had compiled previously so he could avoid accidentally hacking into something dangerous. The program that had infiltrated his firewall had come from a system within SETI. How could that be?

"Are you listening to me?" his mother asked, her arms folded tightly against her chest.

"I'll go to bed soon. I promise," he said while he called up the program that his sniffer had recorded. Code streamed past as he

waited for the entire program to load.

“You do realize,” she continued. “That apes have taken over the world and that we are now their slaves.”

“I know, Mom.” He had to figure out what happened. His hands were balled into tight fists when they weren’t flying over the keyboard. He studied the code as soon as it was complete. What he found was incredible. He accessed his instant messenger and furiously typed out a message to the address he had located. He didn’t have a name, only an Internet Protocol Address. But when he checked that IP address against his personally curated list, he knew someone important had found him.

He could feel his mom standing right behind him, still blabbering on about something or other. Probably going on about how he was a growing boy and needed his sleep or other such nonsense. He failed to see her hands change from the crossed stance across her chest to planted firmly on her hips. “They can even speak English,” she said. “I think the time for humans has come to an end.”

“Sure thing, Mom. I’m practically in bed now,” he said hoping his voice didn’t show any of the fear coursing through him. He finished typing his short message. He was about to hit send when she touched the power button on the top of his monitor. As soon as the screen went blank, he suddenly realized he’d miscalculated her resolve.

“Mom!”

She spun his chair around and pointed at his bed. “Go to bed, mister. Now.”

He glanced at his computer. He knew she would turn off his computer next if he didn’t comply. “I won’t ask you again.”

He never took his eyes off his mom’s face as he reached a hand slowly back and hit the enter key on his keyboard. His mother’s eyes darkened. She reached forward and pressed the power button, holding it for several seconds to force the computer to shut down unceremoniously. She then pulled him carefully out of the chair by

his shoulders. He knew he'd lost this battle as he let her guide him to his bed. He was just reaching for the covers when she picked up the blankets. He quickly snatched them from her hands.

"Mom! I'm too old to be tucked in."

Her entire face became soft and a small smile played around the corners of her mouth. She bent down and kissed him on the forehead but didn't reach for the blankets again. "Of course you are, dear. You've only got four hours before you and Dad need to be in the car. Try to not think about computers for a couple minutes and get some sleep."

She straightened up and looked down at him.

Then he watched as her eyes changed from loving to calculating. He was just thinking this might be a bad sign when she purposefully looked him in the eye, nodded and said, "You've forced me to do this."

He didn't know what she was talking about until, as she left the room, she gathered up the wireless keyboard and mouse. With them cradled in her arms, she stood at the door. "One of us needs to make sure you stay healthy. Now, close your eyes and count backwards from a hundred. You need to sleep."

She exited the room and closed the door after her. He glanced over at the dark computer missing everything he needed to interact with it.

Had he been able to get his message out?

Without being able to do anything on his computer, he didn't know if he was successful or not. He hoped he wouldn't find out the hard way if he failed.

Chapter 2

Chester tried in vain to access Max or Terri's user interface in the ROBLOX world again. Neither of them responded. He glanced over at his running program. It was sitting at thirty percent and slogging through its pre-defined processes. When it hit a hundred percent, the world as they knew it would end. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, then took a deep breath and slowly nodded as he opened his eyes to stare at the screen. It was not a perfect solution but it was all he could do to prevent aliens from wiping out all of humanity. He hoped the most recent message that only one alien was coming was an all-clear and they had nothing to worry about.

If the aliens were bent on destruction, he knew he couldn't save everyone, but maybe he could save enough to rebuild civilization from the ashes left behind. He whispered to himself that he was doing the right thing, but the words sounded hollow and empty.

The program had run up to thirty percent fairly quickly, and then it hit the anticipated bottleneck and slowed way down. Chester wasn't one to subscribe to silly superstitions, but he crossed his fingers anyway as he hoped the process completed before the aliens arrived.

He lowered his head into his hands and closed his eyes. If only he had never discovered Thomas in the first place, they wouldn't be facing the possible extinction of the human race. All around the world, people were going about their lives. Living… loving… fighting.

None of that mattered if there was a technologically superior alien armada that didn't need physical bodies to survive. Chester could see it from the alien's perspective; humans had been given one task: Have Thomas ready for pickup when they arrived.

Chester brought his head up and laughed out loud at the absurdity of it all. They had one job to do. One job! And they couldn't even do that. Maybe humanity wasn't worthy of sticking around beyond the weekend after all.

No! He shook his head sternly and steeled himself as he concentrated on his screen and keyboard.

Chester was certain that, given enough time, humans would reach the stars and meet other species and expand our knowledge of life. Maybe even answer the ultimate question. Why are we here?

But before humans could do that, they had to survive the next thirty-six hours.

Unfortunately, Chester's final solution couldn't guarantee the survival of the human race in so short a time. He needed help from someone who was just as smart as he was. Someone who was already aware of the danger and had begun to do something about it.

Chester raised his head and stared at the Altoids tin under his monitor. It was time to make contact and see if the man on the other side was willing to help.

As Chester reached for the battered tin, a tiny flashing window on his monitor caught his eye. He frowned. Nobody should be sending him instant messages. Nobody even knew who he was; let alone how to contact him.

He moved the mouse and maximized the window. At the top he read: "You don't know me, but my name is Noah and I am friends with Max and Terri. Terri is in trouble and she tells me you can help. Text my cell phone. 804-555-3534. Please hurry. They already have Max."

Chester blinked twice and read it again. He checked the header of the transmission and found that it had been sent straight to him. Who was this Noah? How had he found out about him? And how did he know how to get in direct contact?

Chester checked the route of the file and discovered quickly that it was because of the program he had run earlier. It had sent a reboot request to all the systems connected to Max's ROBLOX world. Noah must have followed that back to the server in SETI. If he had been in contact with Terri as he said, then he might already

know everything.

His hand hovered over the keyboard. This was a serious security breach.

It would seem that the discovery of actual aliens was a much harder secret to keep than he first thought.

This Noah kid was well outside the approved security zone. He shouldn't have been made aware of anything. Terri had put his life in extreme danger by including him. He was a civilian. A civilian child, no less.

There was only one way to guarantee he never told anyone else what he knew. Chester didn't have a choice. He knew it was just a matter of time before others in the government discovered the breach anyway. His hand dropped onto the keyboard and he typed a message to Major General Braxton with an urgent flag on it.

Chapter 3

Max's hands thrust out to his sides trying to keep him from bashing into the doors as he slid violently back and forth across the smooth leather seats in the back of the limousine. Ajax Cortez sped around corners and banked as he flew around buildings to keep up with Nelson. Whenever Max neared either door, he desperately grabbed at the handle and yanked hard in the hopes of leaping out, but the doors didn't budge. They were locked and he couldn't force them open.

The limo suddenly tilted sideways and kept tilting. In a ball of arms and legs, Max tumbled across the roof and landed in a crumpled heap against the far door. The limo righted again and Max found himself face down on the floor. He was getting the stuffing beaten out of him like a teddy bear in a dryer set on high.

He quickly clawed his way to a seat and buckled in, rubbing his swelling nose. He watched helplessly through the window as Ajax caught up with Nelson and rammed him. sending him spinning out of control into the side of a building.

The hover bike crashed through a window and both Nelson and the bike disappeared into the structure. Ajax smashed through what remained of the window and skidded to a halt in the hallway.

He leapt from the car, gun drawn, and ran down the hallway, following the trail of broken furniture and wall mirrors. Max stared at the door left open by Ajax. This was his chance!

Max hurriedly unbuckled himself and yanked on the door handles. They were still locked and refused to budge. He glanced at the open divider between the passenger and driver compartments. He just might fit if he sucked in his stomach. He dove through the tiny opening and into the front seat. Righting himself, he took hold of the steering wheel. His eyes widened as he realized the car was still running. He actually had a choice. Take the car or escape on foot into the building.

A grin slowly formed on his face.

The car it was.

Adrenaline was still pumping through him from the tumbled ride as he slammed his foot onto the accelerator pedal. The engine revved but the limo refused to move. Just then Ajax ran around the far corner and spotted him in the driver's seat. They locked eyes and Ajax raised his gun.

Max pressed down on the accelerator again, but the limo stayed put.

Ajax fired. The front windshield shattered in a spider web pattern.

With cold sweat dripping from his face, Max's eyes darted around him trying to find what was holding the car in place. His eyes finally locked onto the gear display and realized that the car was in neutral. He shot out his hand and grabbed the gearshift on the side of the steering column and shoved it up into reverse.

He still had his foot on the accelerator and the limo reacted instantly.

He slammed forward against the steering wheel as the limo shot backward out through the gaping hole in the side of the building, shearing off the still open driver's side door.

Ajax screamed unintelligibly as he dashed after the limo, firing as he ran.

The windshield caught each bullet, shattering more with every impact until Max couldn't see through it.

The limo flew out of the building into the air. Bullets stopped hammering the windshield as the vehicle rocketed away.

An alarm sounded and Max looked to see the rear view appear on the in-dash monitor. He was headed for another building and his imminent collision with it was rushing closer with each passing second.

Max grabbed the steering wheel in both hands and yanked hard.

The limo turned sharply and skidded along the windows of the building, the side view mirror leaving behind a deep gouge as he scraped by. One of the windows shattered, breaking off the side mirror and raining glass onto the street hundreds of stories below.

Max angled the limo again, easing up on the accelerator pedal and slowing his pace until he was clear of the dense gathering of skyscrapers at the center of the city. Once clear, he finally let up on the accelerator.

He hovered silently in place as he surveyed the damage. He buckled himself in to keep from slipping out the open door should he need to take off or make any more sudden direction changes.

He punched at buttons on the dash until the monitor switched to show the view ahead. He was ready to shift back into drive when something blurred by on the screen.

He looked up in time to see Nelson hovering next to the open door. Nelson had already pulled his coat from the storage bin and held it bunched up in his hand. “I don’t know what you did to make that guy so upset but I don’t want any part of it.”

Nelson threw the bundled coat into the limo. Max caught it and the cube fell out, bouncing off the side of his chair and out the open door. He dove for it in a panic and touched it just as it rebounded off the edge of his fingers. If it weren’t for the seatbelt, he would have followed the cube into the open air.

Max’s mouth hung open, helpless as he watched the cube tumble into the city below. He looked back up at Nelson, his face pleading for help.

Nelson rolled his eyes. “Oh, come on!” he complained and then tilted his bike straight down and dove after it. Max watched as Nelson caught up to the cube, snatched it from the air, and leveled out long before hitting the ground.

Nelson returned and hovered next to the limo. He held up the cube. “Is this what that guy was after?”

Max nodded.

Nelson inspected it closely, turning it around in his hand. “What is it?”

Max blinked. He wasn’t about to tell an NPC what it really was. “I don’t know,” he said.

Nelson frowned. “Well, where did you get it?”

Max reached out for it but Nelson pulled his hand back. “I was almost killed for this. I think I deserve to know why.”

When Max didn’t answer, Nelson’s eyes narrowed. “Did you steal it?”

Max let the indignation fill his face. “Nol Of course not.”

“Then why did that guy want it so bad?”

Max let out a long breath. “If you take me to my house, I’ll tell you.”

Nelson stared at him for a long time before the look in his eyes shifted and he smiled. “Okay.”

Max flinched in surprise. “Okay?”

“Sure,” Nelson said as he shoved the cube back into the storage bin and locked it. He floated his bike alongside the limo. “Hop on.”

Max unbuckled, jumped the short distance, and wrapped his arms around Nelson. As the hover bike dropped away from the limo, Nelson glanced back. “I hope what you have to tell me is worth it.”

“Me too,” Max whispered silently to himself.

Chapter 4

Guided by scores of armed police officers, Ajax had tucked his weapon back into hiding and blended in with the employees as they streamed out through the front doors of the building to safety. Ajax stepped aside to let a police officer in through the door as he walked out of the building.

Once he was halfway down the block he lifted his arm and consulted the small device strapped to his wrist. According to the readout, his limo was hovering hundreds of feet in the air just outside the center of the city.

He turned in place until the arrow was facing straight ahead and quickly began walking in the direction it pointed. The limo wasn't responding to his remote call. He would just have to get closer and figure out how to get to it since it wouldn't come to him.

He glanced up in time to see Max, on the back of that same hover bike, fly by overhead. He slammed his fist against his palm.

He quickly pointed the gadget on his wrist at the speeding bike until it scanned the registry data. He entered a few more commands on his touch screen display and the arrow shifted to follow the pizza delivery bike.

He turned around and followed the arrow on his display deeper into the city. The hovering limo could wait. He didn't need it to get Max and the cube. He just needed to know where they were going to be to obtain his prize.

He didn't know how long of a window he had, but for the time being, his device would tell him exactly where Max was headed.

Chapter 5

Max let go of Nelson and hopped off the bike at the entrance to the high rise apartment building's parking garage. Nelson straightened his pizza delivery jacket as he shut down the bike. "I don't know how you can afford such a high apartment on a delivery boy's salary."

Nelson removed Max's cube from the storage bin and held it up. "So what is this thing?"

"Aye," a voice said with a thick Irish accent from the nearby shadows of the parking garage. "I can tell ye that. That be the Cornerstone."

They both looked in shock as a man stepped from the shadows, pointing a mean looking shotgun at them. Both their hands flew into the air. "Mr. Feeney?" Nelson said, "What are you doing?"

"You know this guy?" Max asked.

"He's your neighbor," Nelson replied.

Max didn't know anything about what happened after the agent stuck the needle in his neck. A lot of time must have passed since he was taken. He had a job, an apartment, and even his coworker knew his neighbors by name.

Feeney looked at Max and squinted one eye. "What I don't know is why ye have it. But I knew if I watched ye long enough, ye would slip up."

He walked toward them, alternating the shotgun barrel between them. "Place the Cornerstone on the ground and step back."

Nelson set down the cube and they both took several steps back. "That's far enough," Feeney ordered, his words mumbled in the thick accent. An unexpected vigor in his step belied his aged body as he walked up to the cube and, never taking his eyes off of them, crouched to retrieve it. Once he had it, he stood up quickly and

looked around before motioning toward the door to the apartments with the end of his shotgun. “Get inside before anyone sees ye.”

Feeney took a step toward them and ratcheted the shotgun for effect, ejecting a shell. “Now!” he yelled. That was all the encouragement they needed.

They tripped over each other as they each tried to be the first through the door and into the hallway. As soon as they were inside, Max fell in step behind Nelson. He didn’t know where his apartment was and Nelson had mentioned he had been there several times.

“Wait!” Feeney hollered.

They both stopped and turned around slowly. Feeney hung the shotgun in the crook of his arm and unlocked an apartment door with his free hand. “Into my flat.”

Max and Nelson looked at each other sharply. Max’s eyebrows furrowed and his mouth gaped open as Nelson shrugged, not understanding why Feeney’s accent had completely disappeared.

Feeney pushed open the door and took several steps back. “After you.”

Max and Nelson looked at each other again and back to Feeney. Raising the shotgun again he smiled at them. “I insist.”

Max moved first and walked through the door into the apartment. How was he going to get out of this? He glanced around for something he could use on Feeney. Nelson moved into the short hallway behind him and stopped. “All the way,” Feeney prompted.

Max stepped into the living room and his mouth fell open when he saw who was lying tied up and asleep on the couch. All concern of being held at gunpoint vanished as he rushed forward and knelt next to the still form; his heart pounding in his throat.

He tenderly placed a hand on her head and bent in close. “Terri?”

Her eyes fluttered open and her face lit up when she saw him. “Max?”

He laughed. “Yes.”

Her forehead wrinkled. “Is it really you?”

He nodded as he helped her sit up. “Yes. It’s me.”

“What do you remember?”

That was an odd question. “We were being attacked by agents in the café and they got me.”

“Do you remember the soldiers underground?”

His brows furrowed together. What was she talking about? “No.”

Nelson fell into the room, Feeney shoving him forward while maintaining a tight grip on his shotgun. “I’m glad you two know each other because my next question will make more sense.” He held up the cube. “How do I get him out of this?”

“You can’t,” Max replied.

Feeney’s eyes narrowed and he angled the shotgun at him. “Tell me how to get him out!”

“You can’t! That cube has no exit code.”

Feeney took another step forward and Nelson made his move. He jumped up and grabbed for the shotgun. The end of the barrel exploded with a deafening roar and blew a hole in the wall, taking a large chunk of the couch with it as Feeney fell to the ground with Nelson.

Max felt the shockwave and patted himself all over, looking for where he was hit. When he realized he was unhurt, he dove into the fray for control of the shotgun.

Nelson stood and kicked at Feeney’s head, his nose exploding with a crimson spray. Feeney dropped onto his back, clutching at his face, and released the shotgun.

Nelson snatched it and spun it around, pointing it at Feeney.

Feeney held a hand to his nose and looked up at the two boys staring down at him. “You won’t shoot me.”

Nelson frowned and spun the gun around like a baton. “True, but I can still do this,” he said as he brought the stock down hard onto the side of Feeney’s face.

Feeney’s head lolled to the right and his hand fell slack to his sides.

Nelson looked around the room. “Find something to tie up this fool.”

Terri held up her bound hands. “If you untie me, you can use this rope.”

Nelson smiled. “Perfect.”

Max and Nelson worked together quickly to untie Terri. Then Nelson bound Feeney up good and tight, pulling at the ropes to be sure they were snug. When he was done, he sat back on his heels and looked at Max. “Are you going to tell me what is going on?!”

Max looked at Terri.

Nelson shouted. “I’m the one who almost got flattened by a limo. I’m the one who rescued you and that stupid cube. I’m the one who subdued the shotgun wielding maniac. I think I deserve some answers!”

Max took a deep breath. “You want to know the whole truth?”

“Yes,” Nelson replied, letting his exasperation fill his voice.

Max nodded and crossed his arms. “You might want to call your boss and tell him you aren’t coming in for the rest of the day.”

Chapter 6

Ajax stopped at the base of the tallest skyscraper in this part of the city. According to his wrist display, the hover bike was still in one of the upper level parking structures and it hadn't moved for quite some time.

There were two possibilities. Either they had abandoned the bike and were driving something else or they were still up there. With nothing else to go on, he used his skeleton key to unlock the front doors to the private apartment complex.

He wasn't going to make the mistake of not being thorough.

Chapter 7

Max and Terri were perched on the edge of the couch while Nelson sat comfortably in a red velvet chair, a tied up unconscious Feeney at his feet, and the shotgun resting in his lap next to the cube.

Max had just finished telling Nelson everything from the point when he and Teri were abducted by the U.S. military up until Thomas was pulled into the cube. When he finished, Nelson stared at Terri. “And you think you are also like him? From the outside?”

She nodded.

He looked down at the still form of Feeney. Feeney’s chest rose and fell, indicating he was still alive. “What about him?”

Max shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“He’s your neighbor. How can you not know?”

“I told you. I don’t remember anything that happened after the agents attacked us in the café and before I woke up again.”

Nelson stroked his chin. “You don’t remember working for a Pizza Place?” Max shook his head. “Or your apartment here?” Nelson continued.

Max shook his head again. “None of it.”

Nelson started laughing.

Max and Terri looked at each other in confusion and then back at Nelson.

He suddenly stopped laughing and his face grew serious. “You expect me to believe that I am nothing more than a sophisticated artificial intelligence program living inside a computer game?”

Max winced. “When you put it like that it doesn’t sound too appealing. But… yes.”

Nelson picked up the cube. “So there is an alien intelligence in here?”

Max nodded. “And if we don’t get him back to the real… our world then everything will be destroyed. And if our world ends, so will yours.”

Nelson tossed the cube to Max and he caught it in the air. Nelson picked up the shotgun and scrutinized it. “If I were to shoot you, you would just what? Magically appear at some spot in the city?”

“Respawn point. Yes.”

He suddenly pointed the shotgun at Max. Max dropped the cube on the couch and stood up, holding his hands out defensively in front of him. “What are you doing, Nelson?”

“If you want me to believe all that malarkey you just tried to feed me, I want to know that you believe it too.”

Terri got up from the couch, stood next to Max, and jutted her chin out in defiance. “If you’re planning to shoot him be sure to shoot both of us.”

“And why is that?” Nelson said.

“Because,” she replied. “I don’t want to have to go looking for him again. Shoot us both and we’ll respawn at the same spot.”

They stayed like that for a long time, none of them moving, when the wall-mounted television emitted a faint beeping sound. All three heads turned toward it. Nelson was the first to speak. “What was that?”

The screen switched on and showed the parking structure with Nelson’s hover bike still sitting in the same spot where they had abandoned it. In one corner of the screen, the main doors that led from the parking area to the hallway outside were just closing.

Nelson lowered the shotgun and leaned forward, squinting his eyes to see the screen more clearly. “Feeney hacked into the building’s security cameras,” he said. “Why’d he do that?”

They all looked at the sleeping form of Feeney and Max slowly lowered his hands, not wanting to trigger an unwanted defensive response from Nelson. “What do you think triggered the screen to turn on?”

Feeney moaned at Nelson’s feet. Nelson looked down at him and nudged him with a foot. “Let’s find out, shall we?”

“Here,” Nelson said as he held the shotgun out stock first to Terri. “Keep this on our friend while I question him.”

She took it and pointed it at the moaning man tied up on the floor. Nelson nudged him again and Feeney came fully awake.

He writhed around on the floor, struggling at his binds. “Let me go!” he demanded.

Nelson knelt down. “Not until you tell us who you are.”

Feeney’s eyes focused on the monitor on the wall. “How long has that been on?”

Nelson glanced at it. It still showed the empty garage. “It just turned on.”

Feeney struggled harder. “Let me go before it’s too late. You don’t know the kind of danger you are in. He’s coming! Untie me now!”

Nelson flicked Feeney’s ear with a finger. “Who’s coming? Who are you so worried about?”

With explosive ferocity, several fist-sized holes blasted through the front door in rapid succession.

“Him!” Feeney replied and tried desperately to scooch like an inchworm out of view. The door kicked in and Ajax burst into the apartment, gun at the ready as he moved swiftly down the hallway. Terri fumbled with the shotgun, but Ajax was too fast and pointed his gun right at her as he strode into the room.

“Don’t!” he commanded.

She dropped the shotgun and her hands joined Max and Nelson's in the air.

Ajax looked at Feeney who watched him with a wild look in his eyes that was equal parts of fear and anger. Ajax was smiling down at him. "How did you let a bunch of snot-nosed kids get the drop on you, Feeney? You were supposed to capture them."

"Oh c'mon." Nelson retorted. "Is everyone working together in some great conspiracy to get us?"

Ajax laughed and waggled a finger at him. "Feeney and I are not together. Just the opposite, in fact. You did me a solid by finding him and tying him up for me all nice and tidy, It's like Christmas has come early." He looked back at Feeney. "You are a very hard man to find. I might never have located you if your friends hadn't led me right to you."

Feeney lowered his head to the floor. "Just get it over with, Ajax."

Ajax bent down and poked at Feeney with the end of his gun. "Not this time, my friend. You don't get to come back with your mind intact and free of your restraints. I don't know how you managed to keep from being affected like everyone else, but I prefer you like this."

Terri looked at Feeney differently. "You're one of the hunters?"

Before Feeney could respond, Ajax stood back up. "We are all hunters in this room." He suddenly faced Nelson. "Everyone except you. What is your story young man?"

Nelson stared at the gun that was now directly pointed at him. "No story. Just helping a friend from work."

Ajax's eyes narrowed. "You were a bit too eager to risk your life for him. Are you sure there's nothing else going on?"

Nelson laughed nervously. "You know what? Now that I'm thinking about it, I don't even really care about him that much. He's always borrowing my stuff and rarely returns it. Do what you want

with him. Just leave me out of this."

He took a step forward, but Ajax stiffened his arm and took aim at Nelson's head, stopping him in his tracks. "I don't think so, delivery boy. You're involved now. You can thank Max later."

Nelson stepped backward and rejoined Max and Terri. "Thanks for trying to throw me under the bus," Max whispered. Nelson shrugged and gave him a half-smile. "I had to try."

Ajax lifted his wrist and spoke to it. "I have what you want." He lowered his wrist without waiting for an answer.

Nelson was hopping lightly back and forth from one foot to the next. "Who did you call?"

Ajax tilted his head at him. "What's it to you?"

Nelson stopped fidgeting and shrugged. "Just curious."

"Be patient," Ajax said, alternating the gun between all three of them. "You'll see."

A moment later, a man materialized in the room with them. He surveyed the room quickly and then smiled at Ajax. "Do you have it?"

Ajax held the cube up.

The man held his hand out to take the cube from Ajax. "Well done, Mr. Cortez."

Ajax pulled his hand back. "Not until I'm sure that you'll hold up your end of the bargain, Mr. Ecks."

Ecks regarded Ajax silently and then smiled again. "Of course." He produced a thin cylinder about the size and shape of a fountain pen. "This will enable you to take over the signal of the boy."

The two exchanged their items, Ajax holding onto his a little longer until he was certain that he had a good hold on the cylindrical device. He inspected it closely and then looked up at

Ecks. “How do I use it?”

Ecks placed a finger on the back of his neck.

“Place the rounded end against the base of the skull right here. Then push the button on the other end with your thumb.”

Ajax gripped the cylinder in his hand with his thumb resting lightly on the button. “Like this?”

“Yes.” Ecks said. “You can safely push the button now to see how it feels “

Ajax focused on the cylinder and pressed the button. Max noticed Ecks close his eyes and turn away. At the last possible second, Max reached over to cover Terri’s eyes and squeezed his own tightly shut.

It didn’t help too much.

The cylinder pulsed rapidly with the brightness of the sun, leaving solid red imprints of his closed eyelids on his retinas.

“I’m blind!” Ajax screamed.

There was a loud scuffle followed by a heavy thump. Then silence.

Chapter 8

Wayne squinted against the brilliant light that spilled from Feeney's apartment in multiple successive blasts. Fortunately, he was sheltered from the full force of the radiant explosion in his hiding spot at the end of the hallway.

He had gone out for food and supplies after dropping Terri off in Feeney's apartment. Returning, he saw the door had been kicked in. He backed away quickly and tucked himself behind a potted plant nearest the door to the parking garage.

Taking out his own weapon, he aimed for the door to Feeney's apartment and waited for someone to come out. He didn't know who to expect, but after capturing Terri and bringing her to Feeney instead of Ecks, it was possible that Ecks had learned of his betrayal and somehow discovered where they were hiding.

It didn't seem likely, but then again, anytime Wayne had dealings with Ecks over the past few months, he had shown to have an abundance of luck.

Chapter 9

Max opened his eyes and blinked away the rosy hue that filled his vision.

Feeney was wriggling free of his binds and Ajax was lying on the floor, unconscious; foam dribbling from his half-open mouth.

Max looked around him. Terri was blinking away the brightness and Nelson had sat down on the couch, looking around him. “I can’t see!” he blurted.

Feeney stood up and pulled the last of the rope off of him. He crouched in front of Nelson and gazed into his eyes, waving a hand in front of his face. Nelson didn’t react.

Feeney stood up and faced Max and Terri. “It shouldn’t last more than a couple of hours. His vision…” He stopped abruptly when he noticed Terri had the shotgun again and was pointing it at him. “Don’t move!” she commanded.

Feeney motioned toward the front door in frustration. “He has Thomas! We have to get him before he destroys the cube!”

They all flinched when they heard several gunshots coming from the hallway followed by shattering glass. Feeney reacted with lightning speed and snatched the shotgun out of Terri’s grip. He then ran to the front door and flattened himself against the wall. He took a quick peek around the corner into the hallway and then visibly calmed as he prepared to step out. Right before he walked through the door and into the main hallway, he called out. “Don’t shoot, Wayne. It’s me. I’m coming out.”

Max and Terri looked at each other. Nelson was still sitting on the couch, glancing around blindly. “What’s going on?”

Max grabbed Nelson’s arm and lifted him from the couch eliciting a cry of surprise from him. He looked at Terri. “This might be our only chance to escape. Grab his other arm!” Max said.

He and Terri guided Nelson down the short hallway between the living room and the shattered front door. Just as they reached the door, Feeney and Wayne stepped in front of them, blocking their escape. Max and Terri clung to Nelson and kept him from walking into them.

Nelson let out an exasperated breath. “Why’d we stop? Wait. Don’t tell me. Let me guess. The bad guys are right in front of us.”

“And that’s not all,” Feeney said. “Ecks has escaped with Thomas.”

Chapter 10

As the sun peeked over the horizon, its brilliance reached Noah's mom through the kitchen window and began to warm her face. She closed her eyes and welcomed the warmth before returning her attention back to the book in front of her. Noah and his father had wanted to get to their silly little convention just as it opened, so they had to leave before sunup. She now got up to enjoy breakfast with them and was planning to enjoy the rest of the day by herself. She sipped her tea, with extra milk, from the cup in her hand.

The doorbell chimed and she frowned.

"Now who could that be?" she said aloud to herself

She opened it and her jaw fell open at the scene in her front yard. The man who stood at attention in the doorway removed his dark green beret. "Pardon the intrusion at this hour, Mrs. Truesdale. My name is Major General Braxton with the United States Special Operations Division. Is your son, Noah, at home?"

She looked past him at the military vehicles parked in front of her house. Armed soldiers stood at the ready alongside the vehicles.

She refocused on Braxton and tried to speak, but the words caught in her throat. She finally cleared them out and squeaked, "Is he in some kind of trouble?"

Braxton smiled. "I just need to speak to him if I may."

She looked at the guns that, while not directly pointed at her house, were gripped firmly by the soldiers. Despite how relaxed they seemed, she had no doubt they would be ready to use them in a moment's notice. She looked back at Braxton. "You can't."

His face grew serious. "I'm afraid I must insist."

Her heart raced as she realized she had just challenged a military man. "I mean…" She swallowed and the words needed to be forced from her throat. "He's not here."

Braxton turned around and snapped his fingers. Two smaller groups of soldiers split from the main group and went around on both sides of her house, their guns raised and ready.

She raised her hands in front of her. Her sudden movement drew Braxton's attention back to her, and before she knew it, she was facing down the barrel of a gun.

It was too much for her and she felt her knees buckle as the world tilted to one side and went dark.

Chapter 11

Chester stared at the progress indicator for his program that was slowly building itself to its dramatic conclusion.

Very slowly.

Too slowly.

“A watched sequence doesn’t progress,” a voice said behind him.

Chester turned in his chair and stared at Emerson, his bodyguard and only confidant. Despite Emerson’s constant insistence, Chester always kept him at arm’s length and rarely, if never, confided in him.

Despite Chester’s high quotient of intelligence, he was not mentally prepared for the inevitable. He was smart, but he lacked the maturity and experience that Emerson had in spades.

Emerson held out a satellite phone. “Major General Braxton on the line for you.”

Chester frowned as he took the phone. This had to be about Max’s friend, Noah. He had sent the Major General a message letting him know that their security had been breached. “Yes. Major General?” he said as soon as he placed the phone to his ear.

The voice that resonated through the phone was not the one he expected. “Don’t react to anything I say, Chester. Get your babysitter out of the room.”

Chester’s heart thudded heavily in his chest, threatening to burst through his ribs like a baby chick hatching from its shell. He coughed abruptly and pretended to choke. He cleared his throat noisily and sat up straighter. He lowered the phone and looked at Emerson. “Can you get me a ginger ale from the fridge?”

Emerson nodded and stepped out of the room. Chester darted from the chair and peered out the door before closing it and locking

the deadbolt. He stared at the phone. He could see his hand trembling as he slowly raised it back to his head. “1X?”

“Hello, Chester.”

“What do you want?” Chester demanded.

1X let out an exasperated breath that sounded tense on the phone. “I’m fine, thanks for asking.”

“This is not a social call. You must have captured Thomas if you are calling me.”

1X laughed. “I was never able to keep up with your brain. As smart as I am, you were always faster.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“Now, why would you say a thing like that to your own father?”

“You are not my father!”

“You can’t escape biology, son.”

Chester could feel his face growing hotter. If he didn’t keep his cool, he might lose the only advantage he had.

“Do you have Thomas or not?” he asked as he sat down at his desk and accessed a folder on his computer. He double-clicked an icon and his computer began running a trace on the connection to the phone in his hand.

“Yes,” 1X said. “I have him.”

“Are you going to kill him?”

“I was, but then I realized that he is leverage. I need him alive long enough to stop the invasion.”

“There is no invasion. They just want Thomas and they will leave peacefully.”

“That’s one interpretation.”

“That’s the only interpretation. They sent a message earlier today that says only one of them is coming to collect Thomas. That is all. There is no invasion. No armada of alien ships. We give them Thomas and they leave.”

“Oh, Chester. You have always been so naïve. I saw that transmission too. Don’t you see? It’s a Trojan horse. As soon as we let them onto our planet, they will take over and there’s nothing we can do about it. You can’t let them do that.”

“They are not the enemy,” Chester said.

1X laughed. “They are technologically superior to us in every way. If they aren’t the enemy then who is?”

“You!” Chester surprised even himself with his sudden and steady reply.

“Me?!” 1X snorted, half laughing.

“You took control of the nuclear missiles of the United States and threatened to use them to get what you want.”

“According to the internal memos coming from the top brass, it’s alien intelligences that have taken over the missiles.”

“We both know it was you.”

There was a quiet pause before 1X continued. “I will admit I am a more dangerous adversary. But only because I am willing to do what the supposed leaders in governments all over the world are too frightened to do.”

“Destroy the whole world?”

“That’s not why I took control of a nuclear arsenal. I had to keep it out of alien hands when they invaded. And, as opposed to the cowards in government, I would be willing to use it if necessary.”

“That’s not a solution.”

“And thus the reason for my call.” 1X said. “Because you are my

son, you are the only person in the world I know I can trust so I want to give you a chance to save the world."

Chester's mouth snapped shut. That comment took him completely by surprise. What was 1X's new game?

1X continued when he realized Chester was going to remain silent. "I am not a villain for villainy's sake. I am not a villain at all, Chester. I was a child of the eighties. We had high aspirations. We were out to save the world from itself. From the various superpowers' policies of mutually assured destruction. Unfortunately, everyone around me got swallowed up by the responsibilities of growing up. They became part of the world around them. They lost sight of what we were trying to accomplish."

Chester knew where this little monologue was headed and couldn't keep quiet. "But not you."

1X chuckled lightly. "But not me. I never lost sight of what we were doing. Not once."

"Not even when I was born?" Chester asked.

"Okay," 1X admitted. "Maybe once. In a moment of weakness."

"Love is not weakness."

"What makes you think it was love?"

"I found the letters. And the pictures."

It was 1X's turn to remain silent as Chester continued. "You loved my mother. And you loved me. You stayed for a year. At least until my first birthday."

1X's voice was thin and quiet over the phone. "I asked her to destroy those."

"I guess she loved you too and couldn't bring herself to erase important history. What happened? Why did you leave?"

The only sound coming through the satellite phone was the faint hiss of static.

“Dad?” Chester promoted.

He heard a quick sniff, as if 1X had been crying. His voice returned stronger than before and emotionless. “I will give you one chance to trade Thomas for what I want.”

Chester closed his eyes. “I don’t have what you want.”

“Of course you do.”

Chester’s eyes popped open and he looked at the battered metal Altoids tin. The card inside held more than just access codes to contact his father. It held nearly a gigabyte of information in its advanced but tiny little memory chip. While it wasn’t a lot of information compared to the current capacities of modern computers, it wasn’t the quantity of data that was important. It was the quality of the data.

And what that data represented.

While Chester had access to the server where this data originally resided, he didn’t have the ability to read it. Chester had obtained it for his father. But when he withheld it, his father became upset and vowed to not rest until he had enough leverage to convince Chester to give it to him.

Chester raised an eyebrow as he contemplated what his father had done. Nearly every nuke in the world was poised to launch at the same time. That was almost overkill. And if that wasn’t enough, now he also had Thomas. Why couldn’t his father look past his own desire for retribution of transgressions from the distant past and see the bigger picture?

Chester saw it very clearly. While still mentally a young child, Thomas was part of an alien species that could open up the universe to humanity. Surely his father was smart enough to recognize the significance of proof of intelligence beyond their own world. Instead, he was laser-focused on finishing what he started long

before Chester was born.

But Chester couldn't let his father's misguided quest for revenge start an intergalactic war. He had to get Thomas back before they came for him. Chester glanced at the clock on the wall. He had less than a day before the alien would arrive expecting to be presented with Thomas.

He took a big breath and let it out slowly. "Give me the IP address of where you want the data."

"Not this time. I won't give you the opportunity to try anything. I want a physical swap."

"How do you propose that? Thomas is inside the ROBLOX world."

"I've been monitoring your communications," 1X said. "Your new friend Noah is on his way to the Maker Faire. He will have access to Max's world at the ROBLOX booth. I will go to the Faire in person and your friend will give me what I want. Once I am safely away, I will send you the location of Thomas in ROBLOX."

Chester's brain went into overdrive. Of course! Despite his origins, Thomas was still a program running inside ROBLOX. 1X couldn't remove him without the equipment that only Chester had. He glanced over at the still forms of Max and Terri strapped into the extraction devices and his heart started pounding.

He still had tough decisions to make. One of them being whether to turn over the data he had stolen for his father. It wasn't a decision he made lightly, but there was more than one intelligent species involved and he couldn't let something bad happen to Thomas. Not right before they would finally make full contact with an alien race.

He took another deep breath to steady his nerves. "Okay. I will send the data to Noah's cell phone. You have my word. Tell me where Thomas is."

"Not until I have my data."

"I don't know how long it will take to upload to Noah's phone.

We only have a few hours before the alien arrives for Thomas and I need time to get him out of ROBLOX."

"Then you'd better hurry. I'd hate for everything to fall apart because you wasted precious time. I'll make contact with Noah as soon as I know it's safe."

Chester thought about whether he should say something, and then decided it best if he admitted everything he knew in full disclosure. He didn't want to derail the exchange by holding back any information. Maybe his father would change his plans once he knew what he was up against. "I've already called the military and told them about Noah."

There was a short pause before his father replied. "I know. What's important is that Noah makes it to the rendezvous location with my data."

"He'll be there but I can't guarantee that the Faire won't be crawling with soldiers."

"That's for me to worry about. You just get me my data."

The phone went dead.

"Dad!" Chester yelled into the phone. It was no use. He was gone.

Chester placed the phone on the desk and buried his face in his hands. He needed time to think. Time he didn't have. All he could do was transfer the data his father wanted into Noah's phone and hope beyond hope that he figured out how to keep him away from it once Thomas was safe.

He looked up at the Altoids tin. He grabbed it and opened it, dropping the card onto the desk next to his keyboard. He lifted the card and slipped it into the reader on the side of his monitor.

He looked at the blocks of data, but was unable to read them. He had tried using the most powerful computers in the world. None of them helped him decrypt the data packets contained in the card.

They were encrypted with a system that defied brute force. He

needed the key, and his biggest fear was that his father already had that key. But was it the key to Pandora's Box like he feared?

There was a knock at the door and Emerson's voice came muffled from the hallway. "Chester. Unlock the door, I have your soda."

"I have to work. I do not wish to be disturbed," Chester called back.

"Okay. I'll leave the soda on the tray next to your door."

Fortunately, Chester had sequestered himself on several occasions to get critical work done so Emerson would not be alarmed that he wanted to be alone and had locked the door.

Chester called up the data from the phony credit card and locked in a secured connection to Noah's cell phone. Noah wouldn't notice his phone had been hacked for a while. Hopefully, Chester would come up with a better plan and his father would be stopped and never get his hands on the information and Noah would be none the wiser.

But until he had a solid plan to stop this, Chester had no choice but to go through the motions of giving 1X the data. His father would be able to tell instantly if the data was fake; so he had to send the real thing. He opened the connection and prepared to upload it.

As soon as the data was ready, he picked up the satellite phone to call the real Major General Braxton. He had sent Braxton to collect Noah and seal the one leak that had sprung. Now it was imperative that Noah reached the Maker Faire.

Chester paused before he finished dialing Braxton's number. Maybe he could buy himself a little more time. He decided to wrap the data in another layer of encryption before sending it.

Chester's fingers were a blur as they flew over the keys. Within a matter of minutes, he was finished.

It was not the most elegant program he had created and it wouldn't stop 1X for long, but would definitely slow him down.

Maybe that would give Chester enough time to figure out a way to stop him.

He quickly dialed the satellite phone and fidgeted impatiently as it rang.

The Major General's voice was instantly on the line. "Braxton."

"Major General Braxton, this is Chester."

"Yes, Chester. We are at the Truesdale residence but Noah and his father are gone and the mother fainted before she could tell us where they went. Do you think they were tipped off that we were coming?"

Chester shook his head reflexively. "I know where they will be in about an hour but it is important that you not apprehend them."

Braxton's confusion came through in his voice. "You said that he knew sensitive information about our operation. Under these circumstances protocol dictates…"

Chester cut him off. "I know the protocol. But he needs to be left on a long leash."

"May I ask why?"

"He's bait."

Braxton's voice went soft. "Bait for who?"

"The hacker known as 1X will be making contact with him at the New York Maker Faire in a few hours."

"How involved is this Noah kid?"

"He isn't. But 1X knows about him and promised to provide me with the location of Thomas after he makes contact with Noah."

"Is this a trade of information?"

"No." Chester said too abruptly. He wished he could enlist the

help of Braxton to stop his father but he couldn't let anyone know that he was the one who stole the data. That alone would land him in prison for a thousand years with no hope for parole. "He contacted me with ransom demands. I am working with someone else directly to secure his requirements."

"The U.S. does not negotiate with terrorists."

"Don't worry. We're not negotiating with him. We are making him think he will get paid. But instead, you and your men will be ready to pounce before he leaves the Faire."

"What about Noah and his father?"

"As soon as we have 1X, bring them in for debriefing. I don't think we'll need to keep them once they have been encouraged not to talk about what they know."

He could tell by the energy coming through the phone that Braxton was not happy to be given direct orders by a kid. But it was one of the concessions the military had made when they were assigned to be Chester's hands in the outside world.

"Do you understand your orders, Major General?"

"Yes, sir," Braxton barked back. "The targets will not know they are being watched."

"Good," Chester said and then disconnected the line. He sat back and stared at the computer where the progress bar showed his process was finally more than halfway complete. He prayed that it would be finished before he needed it.

He didn't know what the data was that his father wanted, but if he was willing to steal an entire nuclear arsenal to get it that was proof enough that it couldn't be good.

He watched the progress bar on the monitor for another minute and calculated how much longer it would take before his program would be ready to run. He would be cutting it close.

Too close.

Chapter 12

Shaun Truesdale, Noah's father, pulled off the freeway and followed the signs that would take him deeper into downtown Manhattan. In the back seat, Noah slept; emitting a solitary snore every few minutes.

Shaun glanced in the rear view mirror again and his heart raced as he watched the desert-camouflaged Humvee exit behind him. It seemed like that same military vehicle had been following them since the turnpike.

He took the next turn suddenly and stared fixedly in the mirror as the Humvee kept going straight through the intersection. He let go of the breath he had been holding and his hands shook slightly as relief washed over him.

He relaxed his grip on the steering wheel and made a quick U-turn to get back to the street he had unexpectedly turned onto. He hadn't realized how tense he had become when he thought they were being tailed. He didn't know why he was so worried. He hadn't given the government, or the military for that matter, any reason to target him. But it was the same instinct that made him glance at his speedometer every time he saw a police car. He knew he wasn't doing anything wrong, but the fight or flight reflex was alive and well inside the lizard part of his human brain.

He headed for the convention center that housed the Maker Faire and, for the first time under the same roof on the same weekend, RoboGames. Noah was attending as a volunteer in the ROBLOX booth but Shaun was there to see the Mech Warfare Hardcore segment of the games. He smiled to himself as he turned the corner and merged into traffic, his thoughts drifting to the one-twenty-fourth scale teleoperated robots that battled for supremacy using metal BBs and micro rocket launchers.

It was rare that he and Noah took a vacation together without the rest of the family. He was glad to have this time to be with his son, no matter that it was only for a couple of days. This was going to be a legendary weekend and there was nothing anyone could do to

keep them from having a magnificent time.

He glanced around at the traffic but thankfully didn't see the Humvee anywhere. What he failed to notice was the Boeing-Sikorsky RAH-66 Comanche, one of only two prototype advanced reconnaissance and attack helicopters built for the United States Army, following him from above the rooftops of the buildings; shadowing his every move.

Chapter 13

Max and Terri were back on the couch, this time as guests not prisoners. Nelson had gone to the bedroom to rest until his sight returned. Wayne paced back and forth as he spoke. “Ecks has Thomas. Do you realize what this means?!”

Feeney did his best to calm Wayne down. “We don’t know that he took him out of the server.”

Max rolled his head from side to side, stretching out the sore muscles of his neck. He raised his arms and reached as high as he could to release the bunched muscles in his back. Dropping them back to his lap, his vision was suddenly filled by an administration console floating in midair above the coffee table.

The interface!

He had completely forgotten about that!

He waved his hands around, searching the menu system for the communications link to Chester. As soon as he found it he typed a quick message and pressed the send command.

Chester appeared in a small screen within seconds. “Max?! Where have you been? Is Terri with you?”

Max’s smile threatened to split his face in half. “Yes but, someone named Ecks has Thomas.”

Chester’s face dropped. “I know. He contacted me and offered Thomas in an exchange. He will tell me where Thomas is as soon as I deliver what he wants.”

Max checked the data traffic logs for his server. It showed one user logging out. He looked back at Chester. “I can see where he logged out, but the bandwidth isn’t big enough to have taken Thomas out with him.”

Chester was shaking his head. “Of course not. Thomas can’t leave

except through a connection like you and Terri."

Max suddenly remembered what Thomas had said right before being sucked into the cube. "Oh no."

"What?" Chester said.

"The cube was a trap. There's no exit code. He can't get out."

"What are you talking about?" Chester asked.

"The cube was not one you provided. It came from Ecks. He never encoded an exit process. Thomas is trapped in it until he dies!"

Chester grew silent for a moment before he exploded in a tirade. Max could barely understand the gibberish spewing from him. He glanced to his right and saw Terri staring at him. He looked around the apartment and Wayne and Feeney were staring at him too.

"What?" Max asked to all three of them at the same time.

Feeney squinted at him. "Are you talking to Chester?"

Max nodded.

Terri moved in front of him. She was barely visible through the haze of the interface. She moved closer and became instantly clear as she passed through the location where the interface hovered.

She grabbed him by the shoulders. "Tell Chester he has to reboot the server!"

Max frowned. "What?"

"Tell him it's the only way!"

"What are you shouting about?!"

"Noah found that our initial code is in resident memory. The code from before we were injured and rewritten. If Chester reboots the ROBLOX server, we can be reset back to when we first entered."

Max focused on Chester who had calmed down. “Can you reset the ROBLOX server with my world on it? Do you have access to do that?”

Chester frowned just as Max had. “I have unrestricted direct access to the NSFNET Backbone. I can go anywhere and do anything I want on the internet. Why?”

“Terri says that we will reset back to our original selves if the world is rebooted.”

Chester was shaking his head. “She’s right. But if I do that you won’t remember anything that happened since you first arrived.”

Max laughed. “I’ve already lost a big chunk of time already. Trust me, it won’t be that big of a deal.”

Chester angled sideways and typed furiously on his keyboard. After a short time, he swung back and shrugged. “It’s worth a try. I don’t foresee any long-lasting effects to you or Terri. Who knows, maybe it will remove Thomas from the cube.”

“So you’ll do it?”

“Sure. It’s worth a try,” Chester replied. “Give me a few minutes.” He turned away and then suddenly faced Max again. “As soon as I do that, you and Terri will appear at the original spawn point with no memory of what I did. What can I tell you to make you believe that it is not the first time you entered the ROBLOX world?”

Max thought for a moment and then responded with the only thing he could think of. “Tell me that I broke my arm falling off the roof.”

Chester frowned again.

Max smiled wryly. “I told my mom and dad I fell off my bike. I wasn’t supposed to be on the roof and I didn’t want to get in trouble. I was already suffering from a broken arm. I didn’t want to get grounded for longer than it would take to heal.”

Chester stared silently at him before he nodded. “Better hold onto

something."

Chester turned away again and the interface disappeared, leaving everyone else staring at him in the apartment.

"Well?" Terri finally asked. "What did he say?"

Max gave her a strange look. "He said to hold onto something."

The floor suddenly lurched under them and tilted to one side sending furniture skittering across the room as if they were in a tiny boat on the ocean in the middle of a hurricane. Max gripped the edge of the couch and crouched on the seat, riding it like a dinghy in a whirlpool. Terri had one hand on the back of the couch and one hand holding his shoulder in an iron grip.

A deep resonating tone reverberated from every direction at once and quickly grew in intensity and volume.

"What's going on?!" Wayne screamed as he fell against the wall as the room tilted further. At this extreme angle the couch slid across the room and smashed through the large picture window with Max and Terri still clinging to it.

They both screamed as they flew through the air. For a brief moment they hoped they were on an enchanted couch that would magically soar through the air toward the horizon. They quickly realized they were on your average, ordinary, everyday couch that plummeted through the air like a brick headed straight for the ground.

As they fell, Max looked to one side and saw the most terrifying thing he had ever seen in his life. The world was folding in on itself and deconstructing before his very eyes.

The world was rushing at them from every direction at once and encompassing them as the world collapsed on their position.

And then there was nothing.

Chapter 14

Chester watched the system shut down and begin the reboot process. There was a knock at his door. He pushed a button on his desk and the door unlocked.

It opened slowly and Emerson poked his head in. “Are you okay, Chester?”

Chester threw his hands in the air. “Why wouldn’t I be okay?! For some reason it’s up to me to keep the world safe. But if it’s not aliens, it’s hackers bent on world domination!”

Emerson stepped into the room and closed the door. “I know.”

Chester frowned at him. “What do you mean, ‘you know’?”

Emerson took a deep breath. “I monitored your call.”

Chester’s eyes enlarged to the size of teacup saucers and the rage built inside him. “You listened in on my conversation with Major General Braxton?!”

Emerson’s eyes stayed glued to his. “The first call was not from the Major General. You shouldn’t try to handle this all by yourself. I can help, but you have to ask for it.”

All the rage that had been building up suddenly released and Chester deflated in his chair. “I don’t have time to ask. I’m trying to prevent Armageddon on multiple levels. I don’t have time to try to convince someone to agree with me. All I have time to do is act.”

Emerson moved closer, gliding across the floor fluidly and silently, no doubt using the assassin training he would never admit to having.

Chester discovered a lot about Emerson in the sealed military records he had surreptitiously located and unencrypted. After reading the actual history of his benevolent protector, Chester had spent months preparing for this day. He hoped he was wrong. But it

never paid to be optimistic, only to be prepared.

Emerson sat down in the chair next to Chester. “Have you ever tried?”

“What if I needed something and was told ‘no’?”

“You might be pleasantly surprised how often you can get what you need when you ask.”

Chester studied the hard face of Emerson. All he could detect was reassurance and caring from a man who could kill with his pinky. It wasn’t easy letting his guard down, but he had been visibly holding it in for far too long and decided it was time to make a good show of it. “I don’t know how to ask.”

Emerson smiled warmly. “It’s easy. You just do it.”

“I don’t…” Chester started but was interrupted by an alarm that chimed on the monitor. Chester gawked at the window that popped up. This window was set to trigger only when the presence of an alien intelligence was detected within the system. He held his breath while a message typed itself on his screen. “I am here.”

Chapter 15

The first sensation Max felt was a steady pressure on his back. His eyes fluttered open and he looked up into the bright blue sky. He realized he was lying on his back.

He sat up and endured the sudden rush of dizziness that faded just as quickly as it hit.

He looked around him at the world. He recognized this world. It was his world. The one he had built in ROBLOX.

Why was he here? His memories flooded back and he remembered Chester and the machine that removed his consciousness from his physical body and loaded it into the computer. He was actually inside ROBLOX. He looked around again.

Why did it look so real?

He blinked twice and pressed his hands against his face, smashing the heels of his hands into his eye sockets. He slowly pulled his hands away and scrutinized them. He clenched them tightly and then opened them again. They felt like they were his real hands. Maybe he wasn't in his ROBLOX world after all.

He looked around at the tops of buildings and recognized creating every one of them. He was definitely inside Arcadia. But his head felt like it was in a fog. He had trouble holding onto any single thought as his mind buzzed without focus.

He stood up slowly, waiting for the dizziness to abate. He massaged his temples with his fingertips as he slowly focused on the area around him.

He heard a noise at his feet and glanced down to his left. Terri was lying on the ground next to him and starting to stir. It was then he noticed they were not the only ones lying on the ground in the middle of the street. There were at least a dozen men dressed in camouflaged combat uniforms scattered around him on the ground.

And every one of them was slowly waking up.

Max grabbed Terri's hand and pulled her up. She mumbled her complaint. "What's going on?" she slurred.

Max was still shaking the cobwebs from his head. "I don't know. But I think we need to hide before these guys wake up."

Her eyes popped open wide and she scanned the street around them. "Who are all these people?"

"I don't know," Max said as he clutched Terri's hand and led them carefully through the smattering of bodies lying on the ground. One of the men rolled onto his side and Max had to quickly shift direction to keep from stepping on him.

"Are they soldiers?" Terri asked.

Max looked at their camouflaged battledress. "It looks like it."

"Where did they come from? Why are they here?"

Max gritted his teeth in frustration. He wished he knew the answer. Instead, he repeated, "I don't know."

One of the bodies at the edge of the strange group sat up abruptly. He was much younger than the rest and was not dressed in military clothing. Max froze as he recognized who it was. "Thomas," he said softly.

It must not have been as soft as he thought because Thomas's head snapped in his direction and their eyes locked.

Before Max could react, Thomas was on his feet and running. A blur dashed past Max, nearly knocking him over.

He watched in shock as one of the soldiers ran full speed, bearing down on Thomas, and tackled him to the ground. Two more blurs joined the first soldier, and in a matter of seconds, Thomas was buried under a pile of camouflage-clad soldiers.

"What's happening?" Terri said quietly.

This time, Max wasn't upset at her for asking. "I don't know," he whispered back.

The largest of the soldiers pulled Thomas out of the pile and pressed a cube against the back of Thomas' neck. Thomas shrieked and was gone in an instant.

The soldier who had captured Thomas got to his feet and held the cube in both hands, lifting it high above his head. He let out a primal scream of victory as the rest of the soldiers all gathered around him, all talking at once. The soldier quieted them all down and then swept his arm down. He focused on the empty space in front of him.

Max watched as the man spoke to nothing and then his attention shifted to look directly at Terri and himself, still standing hand-in-hand in the middle of the street. The man tilted his head and then he waved his arms sideways and stalked up to Max. "Are you Max?"

Max nodded his head silently, his mouth gaping open.

The soldier looked around him at the other soldiers who had followed him and then back at Max. "Chester said to tell you that you broke your arm falling off the roof and not on your bike."

Max's heart thudded and he let go of Terri's hand. How did Chester know about that?

The soldier grabbed Max's arm and, using it like a slot machine, raised his arm and pulled it down quickly. A hazy blue screen flickered to life in the air in front of Max. On the screen, Chester was smiling at him. "Hey, Max."

"Chester?" Max said. "I'm confused."

"When I rebooted the world, it reset all the soldiers I sent in before you and Terri to capture Thomas. The reboot took nearly two hours and we are out of time."

"Two hours? Soldiers? What are you talking about? You said you were sending Terri and me in to get Thomas."

“I wish I had time to explain everything, but I don’t. I’m used to getting what I want…” Chester’s eyes darted away and then back to Max. “I’m going to have to ask you to do something for me.”

Max watched as Chester’s expression shifted from happy elation to dark seriousness. “What is it, Chester?”

Chester licked his lips and moved closer to the camera, his face filling the hovering holographic display. “I need to give Thomas your body.”

Chapter 16

Chester sat back in his chair and looked at the confused face of Max on the screen. Max frowned. “My body? What are you talking about?”

Chester’s heart rate increased and his breathing came in rapid and short gasps. He was used to making tough decisions, but not when he had to stare those affected directly in the face. It was one thing to send nameless soldiers into battle. It was another thing entirely to look a civilian in the face and ask them to make the ultimate sacrifice.

Chester cleared his throat. “It’s only for a little while. I am currently preparing the alien emissary’s code to load into Terri’s body. But I need to load Thomas into your body. Normally, I would just do it without asking for permission, but I am trying to be more…” he glanced over at Emerson who nodded his encouragement.

“Empathetic.”

Max took a deep breath and uttered, “Okay.”

Chester wasn’t sure he had heard the agreement. He had to clarify if Max was agreeing with the plan or just confirming he had heard what Chester had said. “Was that a yes? Can we borrow your body?”

Max nodded and spoke with stronger conviction. “Yeah. I mean, yes. If it will stop the alien invasion do whatever you need to do. Did you ask Terri if she was okay with this?”

“Baby steps,” Chester said. “I’m actually hoping to keep that a secret if you don’t mind.”

“Okay,” Max replied.

Chester couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

He glanced over at Emerson who motioned with a hand at Max on the screen. Chester looked back and began to smile. “Thank you.” Max smiled back. “You’re welcome. Will it hurt?”

Chester shook his head. “No. You won’t feel a thing. Think of it this way. Thomas will get to experience life in a human body for a short time. That should do wonders to link our two species for years to come.”

Max frowned at that comment. “How long before you get our bodies back and we can get out of here?”

Chester blinked a few times. “I don’t know. I assumed they would leave once they had Thomas. I can’t imagine it will take long at all.”

Max looked around him. “Good. These guys around me are getting a little anxious.”

“What guys,” Chester said.

“For some reason, there are a bunch of soldier types hanging around the spawn point.”

Chester nodded. “Right. I sent them in before you and Terri. But they all failed and went insane.”

Max looked around him again. “They don’t seem insane. They all seem fine.”

Chester leaned forward. It couldn’t be. Had resetting the world reset their minds? He typed furiously on his keyboard and called up a subroutine program. Numbers streamed across the screen and Chester’s face broke out into a wide smile. The soldiers were all better, not just the one who had called him and told him they had captured Thomas. This was good news.

His head snapped to look at Emerson. “Do we still have the bodies?”

Emerson nodded. “Of course. They are on life support.” This was even better news.

He turned back to Max. “Max. Let everyone know that their mission is complete and to sit tight. As soon as we finish with Thomas, we will get you and Terri out of there and then start getting the soldiers out.”

Max’s face lit up and then he looked around before his face fell. “But I just got here. I wanted to check out my world. It looks so real.”

Chester laughed. “Trust me, you didn’t just get there. But you finished what you set out to do. You have Thomas. Do me a favor and place the cube on the ground. I will upload Thomas into your body and then get back to you.”

Max nodded and Chester disconnected the screen. He opened several windows on his monitor and typed codes into each one. After a few minutes, he turned to Emerson who had been watching him silently. Chester pointed at the keyboard. “I hit enter, and Thomas will upload into Max’s body and Terri will get the alien emissary at the same time.”

Emerson sat up straighter in his chair. “How long will that take?”

“No more than a couple seconds.”

Emerson pointed at Max’s body hanging limp in the extractor. “All you have to do is press the return key and Thomas will be in that body and another alien will be in the girl?”

Chester nodded excitedly. He was about to meet an alien face to face. Despite it being Max’s face, this was still a banner moment for humanity; and he was going to be a part of it. His name would be immortalized in the history books. Every schoolchild from this day forward would know his name. Even if humanity spread out among the stars over the next thousand years, first contact was something that would always be remembered. He was about to become a legend.

He looked at Emerson, unable to keep the excitement from his voice. “Are you ready to meet destiny?”

Emerson took a deep breath and stood up; a gun suddenly in his hand. “Go ahead.”

Chester’s eyes bugged out at the massive handgun in his bodyguard’s hand. “What’s that for?”

“We are about to let aliens into one of the most secure facilities in the world. I will not take any chances on whether they are, or are not, friendly.”

“How do you think they will react if they wake up facing down the barrel of a gun? Let’s not have first contact be about panic and distrust.”

Emerson stared at him silently. And then his hand moved in a blur and the gun was back in hiding somewhere in his uniform. Emerson raised an eyebrow. “Is that better?”

Chester turned away. The last thing he needed was some military thug ruining everything. He quickly called up a small program that always ran in the background and reset the timer. He glanced over at Max’s body and made his best estimate on when the timer should hit zero.

When he was done, he switched back to the transfer program and readied himself for bringing Thomas to the real world. He took several breaths to try and slow down his beating heart. The adrenaline rushed through him and made his hand tremble as it hovered over the return key. As much as he had been preparing for this moment, he realized he would never be fully prepared for this.

He dropped his hand and his finger depressed the key. It was disconcerting that in the silence of the room all he could hear was his own heart beating heavily against his ribcage.

He imagined the reverberation of a single tone that started out below the range of human hearing until it became barely noticeable as a low hum that rose quickly to a high squeaky pitch until it was inaudible again, just like in all the movies. But there was nothing but silence as the computers processed his command and loaded two alien intelligences into two human bodies.

He was about to make history. Was he ushering in a new era of peace for humanity? Or would Emerson do something stupid and ignite an intergalactic war?

Chapter 17

Thomas existed in emptiness. He was neither awake nor asleep. He couldn't see, but he was not blind. Just like the last time when the cube in his hand had pulled him inside, he had no perception of the passage of time.

The last thing he remembered was suddenly appearing at the spawn point along with every soldier sent in to capture him. It was only because of the disorientation that he was an easy target. His capture was swift.

Now he was back in the nothing. It was not like death. He was still alert even though there was nothing to see, hear, touch, or smell. He existed in a state devoid of external input. He was alone with his thoughts, which raced from one memory to another, never remaining on a single event for any significant duration.

Despite lacking the sensation of time, it simultaneously felt like he had been here forever yet had only just arrived. It was at times like this that he remembered his parents and the secrets they had kept from him. He remembered growing up in an agricultural feudal society. His parents were royalty, so he was spared the back breaking labor of the peasants in the fields. He and his twin brother, Cade, would run all day playing through the halls of the castle they lived in on the hill.

They had a good life only to have it interrupted by something he might never comprehend. In the blink of an eye, he was torn away from everything and everyone he knew and sent off into deep space. The data feeds integrated with his interstellar signal divulged the true history of his species to him. They were aliens living in bodies that helped them blend in with the local intelligent species of any given planet. Their assignment was to interact and catalogue every species in a single whirling sea of stars called a galaxy.

His parents had originally been co-workers. Strangers thrust together to discover, catalogue, and classify species among the expanse of stars. They had unquestioningly performed their mission flawlessly for nearly a million years before they decided to settle

down on the last planet and start a family. They had obviously let their guard down and, quite possibly, overstayed their welcome in a place they never really belonged.

He wondered if he would ever see them again. Space was immeasurable. Sprinkled throughout the cosmos were innumerable worlds that contained life at every stage of evolution.

How were his parents supposed to find him amongst the infinite sea of stars?

He wanted to cry but lacked the tears.

All that he had known and cared about was lost.

Forever.

As he floated silently through the limitless mists of an eternal epoch, his first sensation was that of a great weight placed on his chest. But he didn't have a chest. He hadn't realized that the ether around him was lit from an unknown source until it darkened into a reddish hue.

His lungs suddenly burned from lack of oxygen and he felt as if he would pass out if he didn't do something about it.

He took a deep breath, let it out, and opened his eyes.

Chapter 18

Emerson slowly moved his hand closer to the handle of his Desert Eagle .50 caliber pistol and watched as Chester leaned over Max's body. When Max's eyes popped open unexpectedly, he tensed, but kept the gun hidden.

Chester jumped back and then moved in closer. "Thomas?"

Alien-Max looked at him. "Yes?"

Chester's face broke into a massive grin. "It worked!" He reached forward and began to unhook Alien-Max's body from the machine.

Emerson was at his side. "What are you doing?"

Chester paused. "Letting him out."

Emerson's grip tightened on his semi-automatic pistol. "Why?"

"So he can experience what it is to be human."

Emerson frowned. "What?"

"It was a request from the emissary. She wishes to meet with Thomas in a comfortable room where they can talk alone."

Emerson glanced at Terri. Her eyes were open and she was watching him. The alien was already in her body. He relaxed his grip and dropped his hand to his side in an effort to not look as nervous as he felt. "Do you think that is the wise choice?"

Chester continued unhooking Alien-Max. "Don't be so paranoid, Emerson. They aren't going to hurt us. This is simply a family reunion."

The lines on Emerson's forehead deepened. "Family reunion?" he looked at Alien-Terri. She was still watching him with those dark silent eyes. "Are they related?"

"She is Thomas' mother."

“Mother? Are they all related to Thomas?”

Chester paused, his hand still pulling on the strap buckle, struggling to loosen it. “Are all who related?”

“All the aliens.”

“I’ve told you, there’s just the one. Thomas’ mother.”

Emerson’s head was spinning with the possibilities. “No invading force?”

Chester laughed as he returned his focus on the stubborn buckle. “There never was an invading force. It was 1X who took over the nuclear missiles, remember?”

He looked at Alien-Terri. “Is that the mother?”

Chester nodded and kept fighting with the jammed buckle. “She is the only other alien on this planet. Aren’t we the lucky ones? We have both of them.”

This was working out better than Emerson had hoped. His hand gripped the handle of his Desert Eagle and he yanked it from its holster. He pointed it at Chester. “You can stop now.”

Chester looked at him and his mouth hung open. “Emerson? What are you doing?!”

“My job.”

Chester’s hands betrayed him by trembling visibly as he stood up straight and glared at Emerson. “Don’t point that gun at me. Your job is to protect me.”

“My real job.”

Chester looked at the aliens, his face registering understanding before he looked back at Emerson. “Major General Braxton wants them. And he kept you near me so you could deliver them once they were here.”

Emerson grinned. He was glad he no longer had to pretend to be this little unpleasant genius' friend. "A smart kid like you should have seen this coming."

Chester's eyes narrowed. "I did."

Just then a beep emitted from the computer to Emerson's left. He looked over only to be blinded by a wall of flashing light. He wanted to look away, but his body refused to respond.

Chapter 19

Chester had timed everything perfectly and squeezed his eyes shut against the barrage of multicolored light-emitting diode clusters mounted along the top of his monitor. The lights modulated at a predetermined frequency and pattern to produce temporary visual impairment and disorientation of the target.

As soon as it finished, he had only a few seconds to make his move before Emerson recovered and regained his senses. This was his one chance and he had to take it.

Chester snatched the gun from Emerson's grip. Or at least he tried to. Emerson refused to let go and slowly turned toward him. He could tell by the look in Emerson's half-closed eyes that he was still dazed and confused, but try as he might Chester couldn't pry the gun out of Emerson's massive hand.

He took advantage of Emerson's bewilderment to wrap his fingers around Emerson's hands and pulled hard as he could.

The gun roared as it discharged.

Chester fell away, the ringing in his ears drowning out every other sound except for the automated alarms that announced the detection of gunfire inside the secure compound.

Emerson shook his head, the sound of the gunshot ripping him from his stupor, and glared at Chester. "What did you do to me?"

Chester dashed for the door to his room that was closing automatically in response to the alarm. If he didn't make it out before it closed, he would be locked in the room with a maniac that would most likely kill him.

Chapter 20

The thunderous echo of the gunshot pulled Thomas abruptly from the trance caused by the pulsing lights. He heard a commotion and looked over in time to see Chester dart through a slowly closing door; and a larger man with a gun chasing after him.

They both disappeared from view and the door closed with a faint hiss and a loud click. The door must have locked them inside.

“Thomas?” he heard someone call his name softly. His head snapped toward the source of the sound and he saw a young girl strapped into the same type of machine he was. His eyebrows knitted. “Do I know you?”

She lifted her head and smiled at him, a tear running down one cheek. “It’s me. Mom,” she said between ragged breaths that bordered on weepy laughter. Her smile faded and her head settled back into the headrest. It was then he noticed bright red blood seeping down the side of the machine.

His heart raced and he struggled against the straps that still held him tightly. He finally got one arm loose and managed to unhook enough of the straps to wriggle out of the contraption. He lost his balance and fell out of the machine, landing hard on his side. Ignoring the pain in his shoulder, he rolled to his feet and ran to his mother.

He quickly pulled at her straps. Once they were loose she tried to get up, but instead tumbled sideways out of the machine. He caught her as she fell and lowered her carefully to the floor, sitting cross-legged as he cradled her in his arms like a newborn baby.

He tenderly reached a hand up and pushed away the hair that fell across her face. His eyes darted back and forth searching her eyes for the truth contained in them.

“Mother?”

She focused on him and raised a hand to stroke the side of his

face, leaving a faint smear of rouge on his cheek. Her smile was weak and her voice was even weaker. “I told you I would find you.”

Her eyes closed, her body went limp, and her hand fell to the floor with a wet slap as it landed in a growing pool of crimson liquid that spread out from under them.

“Mother?”

She didn’t respond.

“Mother!”

She suddenly felt heavy as he held her tightly against him. “Mother, no!”

His vision blurred and his eyes burned as they filled with fluid that spilled out over his cheeks. What little he learned about his native species, he knew they could live near to eternity, but only in transcendent form. If they were in a physical body when it died, they would die along with it.

If he didn’t do something fast he would lose his mother forever. He looked around the room, but there was nothing he could use to properly staunch the flow of life-giving blood that drained from her human host.

He was alone in the room and helpless to alter her fate. All he could do was press a hand against her wound and cry out in the hope somebody would hear him. “Somebody! Anybody! Help!”

Chapter 21

Chester wheezed heavily with each breath as he took the next corner at half the speed he had taken the last. It wouldn't have been so bad if the previous corner hadn't already been at half the speed of the corner before that. He was not designed for running and quickly realized he couldn't keep this up for long. Come to think of it, he was not designed for any form of exercise.

He was slowing down with each step and had to find somewhere to hide if he hoped to evade Emerson. He twisted every door handle as he ran through the hallway, slowing him down even further. Each one was locked tightly from the security protocol initiated when the gun had exploded in his tiny room.

He heard the angry pounding of heavy boots behind him and glanced over his shoulder to see the livid face of Emerson bearing down on him; his gun still clenched tightly in a white-knuckled fist.

Emerson caught up with him in the next second and tackled him to the ground, landing hard on him and forcing out what little air was left in Chester's lungs.

With a knee digging deeply between his shoulder blades, Chester fought for every ounce of oxygen he could. "Let me go," he demanded between gasping breaths.

It suddenly became impossible to inhale as Emerson leaned over him and spoke through gritted teeth. "Listen kid, you might think you have been the king in our little chess game, but you have been a pawn, doing what we wanted when we wanted you to do it."

The pressure on his back lessened and Chester gulped in precious air. Forceful hands grabbed him just below the shoulders and pressed together, locking his arms against his sides as if he were in a giant vise. Emerson lifted him off the ground and set him down on his feet. "Now it's time for our little pawn to finish what he started."

Emerson shoved him forward. Chester nearly lost his balance, his

arms pinwheeling as he stumbled forward. Luckily, he remained upright and was able to walk back to his room.

When he entered the hallway that led to his room, the echo of muffled screams reached him. “Help! Help!”

Emerson shoved him forward and they were running again. As soon as they reached the closed door to his room, Emerson pressed his palm against the security panel and the door hissed open at his override command. Emerson grabbed Chester’s shirt collar and twisted, getting a good grip that enabled him to fling him into the room first. Chester toppled uncontrollably through the door and landed on his knees.

Emerson was immediately on his walkie-talkie demanding a medical team to his location right away.

Chester looked up and his heart froze in mid-beat. Alien-Max was holding an unconscious Alien-Terri in his arms. Tears were streaming down his cheeks while blood was pooling around them.

Emerson knelt next to them and pried Alien-Terri from his arms. “It’s okay. I have her,” he said softly in stark contrast to how he had been moments before with Chester.

Emerson tilted Alien-Terri first to one side and then the next. “The bullet passed clean through.” He grabbed Alien-Max’s hand and pressed it against her side. “Keep pressure on that until the medics arrive.”

Emerson stood and took two steps to look down at Chester. “If she dies, I will hold you personally responsible.”

“I’m not the one who shot her,” Chester spat back.

Emerson glared at him. “The gun never would have discharged if you hadn’t been stupid and did that thing with the flashing lights. You are responsible for everything that happens from this moment forward.”

Before Chester could respond, a medical team burst into the room along with two soldiers waving assault rifles back and forth.

Emerson snapped to rigid attention. “Stand down,” he commanded. The guards relaxed and Emerson pointed at Alien-Terri. “Keep her alive.”

The medical team surrounded Alien-Terri, one of them focusing his attention on Alien-Max. In less than a minute, they had Alien-Terri on a stretcher and took her and Alien-Max out of the room in a flurry of activity.

The room fell silent as soon as they were gone. Emerson nodded at the two soldiers and they left the room. The door clicked softly, signifying they were once again locked inside. Chester was still kneeling on the floor, having been unable to move since witnessing Alien-Terri dying in Alien-Max’s arms.

Emerson sat down in a chair and regarded Chester with cold, dark eyes. “What are we going to do with you? Your usefulness has come to an end.”

Chester’s heart hammered in his chest. He sat back on his heels and glared at Emerson. “There will always be a use for someone like me.”

Emerson nodded. “Someone like you, but not necessarily… you.”

“You need me.”

Emerson chuckled quietly under his breath. “Not any more. You moved the aliens into human bodies. Thanks to you, neither of them will escape from us again.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because we are in full control.”

Chester narrowed his eyes at his new adversary. “You’re forgetting about someone.”

“Oh yeah? And who is that?”

“1X.”

Emerson laughed openly. “We haven’t forgotten about him. In fact, we will have him in custody within the hour,” Emerson bowed his head slightly acknowledging Chester’s part in all of this. “Again. Thanks to you.”

Chester choked on his own heart when it leapt into his throat. He swallowed it back down as his mind raced for some way out of this new situation. He said the only thing that came to mind. “1X will evade you.”

Emerson’s eyes glinted. “You think he can outsmart me because he’s your father? If the acorn didn’t fall too far from the tree, he will be just as easy to manipulate as you have been. But you are right. There is a high probability he will escape. In fact, I can guarantee he will evade us in New York.”

Adrenaline surged through Chester and he fell backward, sitting hard on the floor. How could Emerson know that?

Emerson smiled. “You are probably wondering how I know that he is your father.”

Chester nodded silently.

“We have been monitoring your traffic. Well, not monitoring so much as sandboxing it. I had a team of hackers replicate everything you did in here in the outside world. Well, at least those instructions deemed important to achieving the mission objectives. You haven’t been connected to anything outside this room since you arrived. We couldn’t let you have that kind of access. It would be irresponsible.”

Chester’s mind whirled with this new information. “But I sent the data to Noah’s phone. 1X will be able to use it to do whatever he wants.”

“Thought you sent,” Emerson corrected him.

“We intercepted that and downloaded our own package to his phone. 1X will take that phone and evade our men at the convention in New York. He will escape, which is exactly what we

want him to do. As soon as he activates the package in the phone, we will gain access to his entire network. We won't just have him; we will get everyone who ever helped him."

Emerson leaned forward in his chair. "In my book you are still a hero, Chester. You didn't just help us capture 1X. You helped us eradicate his entire organization."

"But why?" Chester said weakly.

Emerson blinked at him. "We saw an opportunity, that's all. The chance at obtaining an alien intelligence has always been the primary objective. Imagine the knowledge and technological advances we can glean from something that has traversed the stars. The United States would become the most powerful nation in the world, if not in all of human history. The fact that 1X became involved was a bonus."

"Obtaining an alien intelligence? Thomas is not some piece of equipment you can keep on the shelf and pull down to use whenever you feel like it."

"Let me thank you again for that. Because of you, we can."

Chester couldn't believe what he was hearing. How could Emerson be so callous with someone who was a living and feeling person, human or not?

He looked at Emerson, unable to keep the rage from filtering into his voice. "You can't do this."

Emerson ignored him and continued to watch the door the medical team had used to carry Alien-Terri's body out of the room. "You better hope she lives," Emerson said so quietly, Chester barely heard him.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked.

Instead of responding, Emerson took a long hard look at him and then left the room; locking Chester inside.

Alone again he stared at the computer terminal sitting idle on his

desk. They may have thought they had cut him off from the outside world, but they didn't know who they were dealing with. They had always underestimated him and this time was no exception.

He started typing. After several tries to access his systems he determined that they had indeed severed his link to the outside world. Or at least they thought they had. He opened the front drawer and removed a pack of gum; stuffing several pieces into his mouth and chewing noisily as he studied the room around him.

Emerson had said he was responsible for everything that happened from this moment forward. If that was the case, then he had to do everything in his power to make sure that the world did not end because of him. The past had already happened. The future was uncertain. But the present was right here, right now. Chester couldn't let the present slip into the past without doing something. And if something could be done, he could do it. He was, after all, the smartest kid alive.

He pulled his monitor to the side and tugged on the wires leading into the wall. They sparked as he ripped them out of the hole. He dropped to the ground and reached under his desk, groping around in the gap between the base and the floor. His fingers finally found what they were looking for and he pulled out the walkie-talkie left behind by one of the medical personnel. The technician probably still had no idea he was missing it since, technically, Chester had borrowed it from his bag when no one was looking and slid it under his desk with a foot.

He had one last play he could make. If this didn't succeed, he would have failed all of humanity. Not that anyone would be around to get mad at him.

He removed the wad of gum from his mouth and deposited it on top of his desk with a sickly wet thud. He used his teeth to strip the plastic coating from the tips of the wires he had yanked from his monitor until he had exposed half an inch of copper wire on both ends.

He retrieved the keyboard he had shattered previously in a fit of rage from the garbage can and pulled it apart, exposing the wireless

Bluetooth transmitter that sent the signals from the keys to the linked computer.

He pried out the wireless chip, exposing the two leads that sent the raw key press data into it.

He cracked open the case of the walkie-talkie and spent nearly ten minutes slowly working it apart until it sat in a jumbled mess. The wires that held each component were still connected, so the walkie-talkie would continue to function despite being spread out on his desk.

He grabbed the wires and, selecting portions of the wad of gum, stuck them to two contact points among the mass of walkie-talkie parts. He used more gum to connect the wires to his broken keyboard.

When he was finished, he sat back and looked at his Frankenstein monster. It was spread out on his desk and looked like a circuit experiment gone wrong. It might not even work, but there was only one way to find out and he had to try.

He grabbed the small Altoids tin and opened it. Removing the credit card, he tapped in the password on the integrated numeric keyboard. The tiny LCD screen displayed a series of numbers.

He tenderly tapped in the same number sequence in the walkie-talkie's keypad and pressed the talk key. The walkie-talkie beeped twice to verify the connection had been made.

Chester typed his message directly on the little rubber nubs in his broken keyboard. He didn't have a screen to verify what he was typing, so he composed his message from memory and trusted that every keystroke registered and that his message was complete enough to be comprehended by its recipient. Unfortunately, without a proper display on the walkie-talkie, it would be a one-way conversation. But if it worked, it might be all he needed.

When he was done, he sat back and waited for a second double-beep to confirm that his message had been delivered. Each second felt like an hour as he listened for the confirmation tone that would

let him know his message made it to his father. He kept glancing at the clock on the wall until it indicated that a full two minutes had passed since he had sent the initial activation code. It shouldn't have taken more than thirty seconds to get a response.

Unless something had gone wrong.

He checked the connections of his hastily built monstrosity. They should be suitable for the job. He shouldn't be asking too much from his little chaotically constructed text transmitter. The problem had to be on the other end. Had something happened to his father? Had he already left for his fateful rendezvous at the Faire before Chester could warn him?

Chester felt the sweat start to run down his face. If he couldn't get in touch with his father before he left, he wouldn't know it was a trap. His father wasn't an idiot. Of course he knew there would be a trap. But he had no idea that the trap was in Noah's cell phone.

Chester had to warn the only man in the world who could help him save Thomas; and ultimately the world. But that wouldn't happen if his message never went through.

Chapter 22

Max sat in the shade of a bus stop and stared at the empty spot in the middle of the street that had only recently held the cube that contained Thomas. When the cube had disappeared, Max felt a slight tightness in his chest. He knew that was his own fears getting the best of him. There was no way he would feel anything that happened to his body while he was in his ROBLOX world. At least, that's what Chester had told him.

He looked across the street at the soldiers who were still standing in a loose group and eyeing each other warily. Chester hadn't mentioned them before. Maybe there were other things he had failed to mention.

Terri sat next to him, watching the small group of soldiers. "Who are they?"

Max shook his head. "Chester said he sent them in before us to find Thomas. Apparently, they all went insane which is why he sent us in."

One of the men broke from the group and walked up to the sheltered bus stop and looked down at Max. "What's your name kid?"

"Uhh, Max," he replied.

The man poked a thumb in his own chest.

"My name's Ajax Cortez. It looked like you were talking to someone. Was that Chester?"

Max nodded. "Yeah. He told me to let all of you know that he's getting us out of here."

Ajax narrowed his eyes. "When?"

Max shrugged. "I don't know. He's meeting with Thomas right now. I guess as soon as he's done with that, he's getting me and

Terri out and then each of you."

Ajax nodded in agreement. "Did he say how long?"

"He didn't think it would take too long."

Ajax looked at the men gathered across the street. "Good. I don't know how we all showed up at the same time, but at least we accomplished our mission. I'll let them know."

"Thanks," Max replied.

Ajax turned and was about to leave the shade of the bus stop when a large hover truck dropped quickly to land in the middle of the street, cutting off their view of the group of soldiers.

The rear doors swung open and several men in dark suits and sunglasses leapt out, each one holding a massive rifle. They focused all their attention on the other side of the street and disappeared from view.

Ajax grabbed Max and Terri and pulled them behind the bus stop, crouched low, and motioned for them to remain silent. Seconds later, repeating discharges from rifles echoed from the buildings around them. When the screaming and weapon blasts died down, Ajax quietly told Max and Terri to stay put and keep out of sight.

He slowly raised his head and went stiff. He stood up slowly. Max angled his head to see what had frightened Ajax and found himself facing down the barrel of a large rifle.

"Get up! Both of you," the man holding the gun demanded.

Max and Terri, their hands raised in the air, both stood up slowly. Another man dressed differently from the rest rushed forward and clamped a shiny metal cuff on the right wrist of all three of them. As soon as he finished, he smiled at Max. "You can lower your hands now."

Max lowered his hands when he saw the man with the rifle relax and lower his weapon first.

Ajax took a quick step toward the man. “What is the meaning…” He never finished his sentence. Ajax suddenly tensed up, shook uncontrollably, and fell to the ground; flopping around like a fish on dry land.

Max noticed that the man who had shackled them with the wrist cuffs held a small black device in his hands; his thumb pressing on the single button on the top. He lifted his thumb and Ajax stopped convulsing.

The man crouched down next to Ajax. “I expect utter and complete compliance from all of you. If not, you will suffer greatly.”

He pressed the button again for effect and Ajax’s entire body trembled violently. The man released the button and Ajax rolled onto his side, foam running from the corner of his mouth.

The man stood up and looked at Max. “Are both of you capable of learning from your associate’s mistake?”

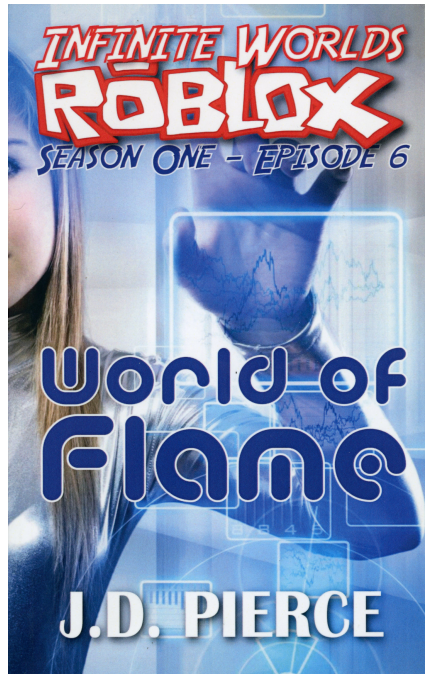
Max looked at Ajax on the ground. He looked back up at the man and nodded silently.

“Good,” the man said with a smile. “Let me introduce myself. My name is Juan Ecks. Chester and I need your help.”

The Adventure Concludes…

Season One - Episode 6

World of Flame



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ISBN 9781619780958
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